

Laughter in the Dark

Art Buchwald's first play, *Sheep on the Runway*, is a cartoon allegory. Flush with military hardware but low on brain-power, a group of bumbling, do-gooding, fast-talking Americans lead a small, neutral Himalayan nation in Asia into a deadly heap of trouble. The difficulty with themes like this is that a playgoer is not quite sure whether he is experiencing the shock or the drone of recognition. An audience should never know as much as or more about a play than the playwright does.

Since Buchwald never opts to go all out for satire or all out for farce, the

play seems to be stalemated in a diplomatic buffer zone between the two. In straight allegories, the characters go by general labels such as the Pilgrim, the Fool, the Saint. In Buchwald's comic allegory, the characters are similarly walking labels: the Hawk (a syndicated Washington columnist), the Ambassador, the Pentagon Man, the C.I.A. Man, the A.I.D. Man, the Local Prince. Stereotypes do contain truths, and they serve a playwright well, but only 50% of the way. The other 50% comes from a playwright's individuation of his characters so that they surprise, confound, delight and involve the audience. That is the 50% that Art Buchwald cannot yet supply in *Sheep on the Runway*.

What he does supply is a fusillade of laughs. These are not so much punch

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SCENE FROM "SHEEP"

Thirst quenchers in a dry season.

lines as counterpunch lines. "You are considered an underdeveloped nation by underdeveloped nations," the Local Prince is told by the Columnist. "Disneyland—that's our code name for Washington," explains the Ambassador. Political in-joking is the sport of the evening, but some of it has a kind of frantic blandness about it: "Do you realize that the average age of Chiang Kai-shek's privates is now 64?"

The cast is uneven, and Director Gene Saks too often seems merely to have urged his actors toward assorted bedlam. Martin Gabel displays a finely arrogant condescension as the Hawk, who can sniff out Communist threats in unpopulated jungles, and David Burns as the Ambassador hilariously exhales his words like a trombone in anguish. A lavish campaign contributor, he storms that Washington doesn't even know where his post is. That is the play's problem as well, but the laughs are located at Broadway's Helen Hayes Theatre, and in a dry season they are thirst quenchers.